Fireweed

Fireweed Issue 16: 'Women of Colour'. 1983 ISSN 0706 3857 Fireweed Inc. PO Box 279, Station B, Toronto Canada M5T 2W2

Afro-Caribbean women, women from the Indian subcontinent, Native American women and Japanese women have, due to common oppression, come together as 'Women of Colour' to produce Issue 16 of the Canadian feminist quarterly, *Fireweed*. The birth of the issue was not easy. After abandoning the first proposal for such an issue, it was only when women of colour grew strong and visible that the collective was forced to hand over the journal for the special edition. As the editorial guest collective state, we had questions.

'Did Fireweed now feel the climate was right? Was it now "politically correct" to devote an issue to women of colour? Would this issue be seen as "taking care of the matter"? Having been "discovered" by white feminists would women of colour then see the repetition of an historical pattern within the feminist movement which has consistently dealt with our concerns in a token fashion at best and most often not at all?'

Despite their doubts, the forum that Fireweed would provide was too good an opportunity to miss. Thus through struggle was born the *Women of Colour* issue of *Fireweed*.

The quarterly consists of analytical essays, short stories, poems, reviews, profiles on working class East Indian women and West Indian women and visual arts and group discussions through which we are able to catch a varied and inspiring glimpse into the lives of Women of Colour in Canada. This issue becomes a very important vehicle through which Women of Colour in Canada and Black Women in England can begin to make international links and explore our similar experiences.

It is through the Guest Collective group discussion: *We appear silent to those who are deaf to what we say*, that we can begin to recognize issues that touch the lives of Black women living in England. It raises questions about racism and class within the white Canadian women's liberation movement where the words 'women' or 'seeing things from a women's perspective' are often synonymous with seeing things from a white middle class perspective.

As Himani says:

And there is talk about 'coming from the woman's perspective, coming from the woman's standpoint'. It seems to me very empty this standpoint, because I do not know who this woman is that they are talking about. It never comes down to a specific group of women. They talk about women as an empty category. They will not talk about women as class, about a particular type of woman, about woman as race, so it leaves one very empty at the end.

Any analysis of research into the conditions of working women revolves around white women in white collar jobs whereas the experiences and hardships of immigrant women in work on the production line as labourers, domestic workers or as piece workers, are totally negated.

Another similarity with Britain is the way in which the Canadian women's liberation movement is preoccupied with the oppression of women in a patriarchal society and fails to address the issues of race and class. It is for these reasons that Women of Colour cannot rely on a solidarity or sisterhood with Canadian white women and simultaneously have looked to their own communities for strength and support. This process has highlighted differences between Women of Colour and white women which is illustrated by the latter seeing Women of Colour as being male identified.

Another important issue raised by the discussion is that of the relationship of immigrant labourers in Canadian society. This is evident in the articles *Profiles of Working Class East Indian women* interviewed and translated by Prabha Khosla and *Silenced* – talks with working class West Indian women about their lives and struggles as domestic workers in Canada, compiled by Makeda Silvera. Both these testimonies echo the lives and conditions of Asian and Afro-Caribbean women in England today. They reflect the manner in which we as Black and migrant people have uprooted ourselves from our countries of origin, a direct result of imperialism and colonialism, to work in so called developed countries.

Much of the work Black women are forced to do in Canada involves working in factories, farms, in kitchens or as domestic workers, often ununionized and only with support from their own communities. These profiles illustrate the similarity between Black women in England and Women of Colour in Canada. They are vivid living testimonies of the hardships and struggles facing Black and migrant women.

Lesbians of colour, loving and struggling – conversations between three lesbians of colour is yet another area where Women of Colour in Canada are struggling to be seen and heard. From this discussion emerges the question of the visibility of lesbians of colour within the white Canadian lesbian scene. This is related in an incident when Anu is interviewed for a job in a white feminist organization:

When they hired me their underlying assumption was that a Woman of Colour could not be a lesbian. In their minds, these two things were mutually exclusive. They just assumed I was straight and they never checked it out with me. During the interview one woman asked me if I would have problems working with lesbian women. Even after I started working with the women as a group they overlooked every instance that could point to the fact that I was woman-identified. I live with a woman and they know that but they haven't made the connection yet. I've decided not to identify myself as a lesbian with white women anymore. When I do tell white lesbians/straights that I am a lesbian, I am met with a curious disbelief or they begin to regard me in a sexually racist way – I'm exotic, a novelty, a toy.

Another issue that becomes highlighted through the discussion is how hard it is for Women of Colour to come out to their families for fear of rejection and subsequent isolation. However the outcome is positive as Pramila states: 'We have to begin a dialogue with other heterosexual Women of Colour. We have to cross that bridge to create a new society.'

The *Women of Colour* issue of *Fireweed* becomes a historical document whereby we can participate in the experiences of other Black and migrant women and breathe a sigh of relief as we realize that we do not stand alone.

Shaheen Haq